Beginnings

and Endings

(and what happens in between)

Maggi Dawn

Daily Bible readings from Advent to Epiphany

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Contents

SECTION III
PROPHETS AND HERALDS

SECTION IV
ANGELS AND ANNOUNCEMENTS:
HOW DOES GOD SPEAK TO US, AND HOW DO WE HEAR?

SECTION V
THE HOLY FAMILY: THE TIMELESS IN THE EVERYDAY

Preface to the second edition

This book began life as a blog, way back in the early 2000s, when I decided one year to write a blog post every day in Advent. I wrote a second set the following year, after which BRF Ministries asked me to develop the whole project into this book. In the two decades that have elapsed since then, my life has mirrored the themes of the book, taking me through a host of endings and new beginnings of my own. A career move transported us to life in another country, with a new climate and a new culture. My son who appears in the pages of this book is now grown up, and I have entered the generation of grandparents, great-aunts and godparents. And some of those who read early drafts of the book – my father, my stepmother, and one of my closest and dearest friends – are no longer here to see this second edition, but alongside those sorrows I have found unexpected joys in some wonderful new friendships.

So it is that, revising the readings for this new edition after living through nearly two decades of beginnings and endings of my own, I have found that while many details of language and cultural context needed updating, the overall truths of Advent remain the same. Every year we await the celebration of Christ's first coming, an event in the past that marked the beginning of a new era of faith. Every year we look for his coming again – a future hope, the details of which are a mystery, but which nonetheless assures us that somehow, at the end of it all, there will again be a new beginning. But every year we ponder those great truths as we live in the in-between times, in circumstances that have changed since previous years, either because a new beginning has required the ending of something else or because an unforeseen ending has opened the way for another – perhaps yet unknown – new beginning.

The world now feels more violently polarised in political opinion than it was when I first wrote the book; we seem to be living increasingly on a knife-edge over environmental concerns, and the future seems more uncertain than ever. But those timeless truths remain: the story of salvation had a beginning, and we still place our faith in an ending of future hope. This year, next year, and for years to come, we continue to live between beginnings and endings as the stories of our own lives unfold. The great Advent promise is that Christ will come, as surely as day follows night, and therefore the future beckons us with hope, not despair.

Maggi Dawn

Introduction

Advent is about beginnings. It marks the beginning of the church year and a time of preparation for the celebration of the coming of Christ into the world. It celebrates the beginning of the Christian era in the birth of Christ and also looks further back to our ancient roots in the lives of the patriarchs, the earliest human stories of Adam and Eve, and into the timeless eternity of our beginnings in God. So there is an obvious connection between Advent and beginnings.

Advent is also about endings, because it anticipates the second coming of Christ. In Christian belief, this idea symbolises the end of the present era and the fulfilment of the kingdom of God. This is a clearly held hope within the Christian faith, yet at the same time, like all future hopes, it is shrouded in mystery because precisely what it means in reality is as yet hidden from us. Here, too, the Bible tantalises us with promises that cannot be fully understood.

The biblical accounts of beginnings and endings are incomplete and don't give us the crystal clarity of factual evidence we would sometimes like the Bible to deliver. But this does not indicate that they have no meaning for us. Even science and rational thought, in which we invest so much trust, cannot give us a full account of our beginnings, and the prediction of the end is even more a matter of conjecture and likelihood. The Bible is neither a scientific manual nor a magical book of fortune-telling. It does not aim to explain science or to predict the future; rather, it gives us stories, histories, songs, experience, and spiritual meditations to aid us as we make sense of the lives we live and the world we inhabit.

Biblical accounts of beginnings and endings tell us that the Christian faith is a linear journey. It starts somewhere and goes somewhere; it

develops through time, rather than simply going round and round in an endlessly repeating cycle. The season of Advent, too, reminds us that we come from somewhere and we are going somewhere, and thinking about beginnings and endings helps us to rediscover meaning and purpose as we live in these times that are 'in between'.

There have been periods in history when the Christian hope of a second coming and an afterlife has been used to mollify people instead of addressing issues of justice, or even to frighten Christians into submission. It is better to understand faith not as a guarantee of some future outcome, but as an anchor to the present, a way of discovering freedom and depth, and enjoying abundance in our life now. We do not live in the past, but we can learn from it; neither do we want to hasten our own end or to live our lives in fear of what the future will bring. Jesus said that he came that we might have life here and now – not a nebulous promise of some ever-distant future.

The opening section of this book deals with 'beginnings', looking at how the gospel writers and the writers of the Genesis accounts reveal their ideas about where our story begins. Subsequent sections touch on each of the themes symbolised by the candles in an Advent wreath – the patriarchs, the prophets, John the Baptist and Mary the mother of Jesus. Each of these themes marks a new beginning in the story of salvation, and at the same time each one looks towards the ending in a fresh way.

In between, we shall pause to consider 'angels and announcements'. The nativity stories are renowned for the appearance of angels announcing new beginnings. This section connects them up with some older stories about angels and offers some meditations on how we hear God's voice and how we respond to the call to new beginnings in our own lives.

The holy family themselves will become the focus of our readings in the first week of Christmas. As we look back on their story, we see how it dramatically marks the end of one era and the beginning of another. Yet, as they themselves lived through it, it was as much a

time in-between as our lives are now. This family has much to teach us about the meeting of heaven and earth, the extraordinary and the ordinary, within everyday life.

Finally, we will look at endings in the Bible, although (and I hope this isn't too much of a spoiler!) we shall discover that as the Christian faith is built on the hope of resurrection, endings are always new beginnings.

I invite you to join me in this meditation on *Beginnings and Endings* this Advent. It has been a real pleasure to write on a theme that seems to open up new depths every year, and I hope that you will enjoy these meditations as much as I have enjoyed writing them. I wish you a happy Advent.

— *I* —

Where do I begin? The gospels and the salvation story

The beginning of Advent is a beginning in a number of different ways. Advent is an ancient season of preparation, both for the celebration of the first coming of Christ into the world and for the anticipation of his second coming. There are themes that carry us through Advent, highlighted by traditional readings and by an Advent wreath with four or five symbolic candles.

The first Sunday of Advent is the beginning of the church year, the liturgical journey that explores not only the story but the meaning of salvation. Creation as the start of everything is a theme that is often highlighted at this time.

It is also the beginning of our preparations for Christmas – and, as Christmas celebrations creep further and further back into December, Advent is focused more on Christmas than it ever used to be. The preparation for Christmas, and the stories of the nativity, are a key part of the later weeks of Advent.

This first section of the book will visit these overlapping ideas and will also include a look at the beginning of each of the four gospels, to see how their chosen starting places for the story of salvation connect up to the big themes of Advent.

1 December

Early or late?

The Lord is my light and my salvation;
whom shall I fear?
The Lord is the stronghold of my life;
of whom shall I be afraid?
When evildoers assail me
to devour my flesh –
my adversaries and foes –
they shall stumble and fall.
Though an army encamp against me,
my heart shall not fear;
though war rise up against me,
yet I will be confident.
One thing I asked of the Lord;
this I seek:
to live in the house of the Lord
all the days of my life,
to behold the beauty of the Lord,
and to inquire in his temple.
For he will hide me in his shelter
in the day of trouble;
he will conceal me under the cover of his tent;
he will set me high on a rock.
Now my head is lifted up
above my enemies all around me,
and I will offer in his tent
sacrifices with shouts of joy;
I will sing and make melody to the Lord.
Hear, O Lord, when I cry aloud;
be gracious to me and answer me!

'Come,' my heart says, 'seek his face!'
Your face, Lord, do I seek.
Do not hide your face from me.
Do not turn your servant away in anger,
you who have been my help.
Do not cast me off; do not forsake me,
O God of my salvation!
If my father and mother forsake me,
the Lord will take me up.
Teach me your way, O Lord,
and lead me on a level path
because of my enemies.
Do not give me up to the will of my adversaries,
for false witnesses have risen against me,
and they are breathing out violence.
I believe that I shall see the goodness of the Lord
in the land of the living.
Wait for the Lord;
be strong, and let your heart take courage;
wait for the Lord!

PSALM 27

If you're reading this on 1 December, you may well already have had a Christmas card or two fall through your letter box. I love receiving Christmas cards, from the first ones that arrive on 1 December and those that arrive with a slightly panicked message of lateness on Christmas Eve, to those that come with a sheepish apology around 3 January. Whenever they arrive, early or late, I'm always cheered up by this annual reminder of how many good friends I have.

I have mixed feelings about Christmas beginning way ahead of schedule. On the one hand, especially since I emigrated to the USA, I have grown happily accustomed to buying a new bauble in July – every year our tree has a lovely reminder of where we went on holiday. On the other hand, if Christmas starts in earnest in November, it can get in the way of appreciating what Advent is all about, and I have sometimes caught

myself getting a bit self-righteous about not getting to Christmas too soon. But when the last posting day is upon us and I realise I'm behind schedule, then I envy the foresight of my early-bird friends and vow to be more like them next year. Christmas can sometimes feel less like a feast to be celebrated and more like a deadline to be reached. It's often, though not always, the woman in a household who carries the stress of having everything ready for Christmas, but Christmas creates deadlines for all sorts of other people too – church leaders, school teachers, retailers and many others. Such moments focus very sharply our sense of time and of being bound by time.

In devotional terms, though, following the seasons of the church year can leave us with this feeling that things never happen at the right time. The realities of life rarely match up with the mood of the church year: they always come too early or too late. If, as we travel through Lent or Advent, life is delivering abundant joys and happiness, the sombre tone of the season never quite hits home. But it's even harder to deal with if you are feeling down or low when Christmas or Easter arrives.

One year, a friend and I wrote to each other all the way through Lent, sharing our reflections on the season. She was a great devotee of retreats and silent space, but at the time, I was the mother of a newborn baby, and silent spaces were few and far between. Our Lenten experience was quite profound that year, as we were both going through extreme lows for quite different reasons. On Easter Day my friend emailed to say: 'I'm so fed up with the church year. Resurrection? I don't think so. I feel like I need to stay in Good Friday for a good long time yet.'

All too often we have this dislocated feeling of being out of time, out of step, and Christmas is a particularly difficult season to negotiate if you don't feel like celebrating. It's not only the church but the whole culture that feeds us an exaggerated image of happiness and celebration, which sets us up to feel very low if we are not in a party mood. Most of our life is lived in this in-between place where things come early or late, but never on time.

Psalm 27 is sometimes given the title 'A triumphant song of confidence'. I think it reads more like a defiant song than a triumphant one. The way the psalmist mixes up his tenses creates an interesting effect: reflecting on past promises fulfilled, asking for something to happen right now, stating that it's already happened, and confidently predicting that it will happen in the future. He seems, at one and the same time, to be giving thanks for something that is already here and asking for help in the midst of trouble. There's an urgent anxiety about his cry for help: 'Do not cast me off; do not forsake me' (v. 9). Perhaps there's even a touch of the childish promise to be good if God will only help him: 'Teach me your way, O Lord, and lead me on a level path' (v. 11). The psalmist's experience reminds me of the dislocation of our lives from the church seasons. God's gifts do not always come according to our timetable or at the moment when we think we need them. Advent and Christmas promise us God's presence, and yet it seems that sometimes God hides his face and is nowhere to be found. God's timetable is not the same as ours, and our sense of need or urgency doesn't twist God's arm into a response.

When I was a child, we had an aunt, a remarkable and wonderful woman, who always, absolutely dependably, forgot all our birthdays. But at some random time of year – May or July or November – a big parcel would arrive full of presents. They might say 'Happy Birthday' or 'Happy Christmas', regardless of the time of year. It seemed madly exciting to us to get a completely unexpected present just when life was going through a tedious moment. It was always books (she taught English literature and was bang up to date on the latest releases) and they were always wonderful. The same aunt, when we went to stay, would sneak into our bedroom just before sunrise, pull jumpers over our pyjamas, and put our bare feet into shoes with *no socks* (against Mum's rules!), and quietly exit the house with us, leaving everyone else asleep. Then she would pile my sister and me into her very old Austin and drive us down to the beach. This was in Somerset, where the beach goes out for about two miles at low tide. There she would actually drive across the sand – again, strictly against the rules, but there's no one there at sunrise to make you obey the rules – and out

of the car would appear a Primus stove, an omelette pan, eggs, butter, salt, pepper and fresh bread. We ate omelettes and drank tea as the sun rose over the sea, and then went paddling in our pyjamas, breathing in great gulps of early morning salty air. The woman was a genius, and we adored her.

Whenever I forget a Christmas card, a birthday card or whatever, I think of Auntie Margaret. Please, God, let me be like her. I hope I never become the kind of person who demands diamonds and perfume on the right date. I hope I do become the kind of person who remembers to send gifts that someone will love, instead of gifts to satisfy a deadline. Whenever God's gifts elude me – when there is no joy at Easter, no wonder at Christmas, or simply no sense of God's presence in between – again, I think of Auntie Margaret. The gift will arrive at the right moment, even if not on the 'right' date. Joy on demand is joyless indeed, but omelettes on the beach, and presents in July, I can seriously live with.

If we confidently depend on the knowledge that God's gifts, unlike Santa's, are not delivered to a deadline, then we can live within the seasons knowing that the joy they represent will come to us, unexpectedly, not necessarily on time. We can say with hope, or even a little holy defiance, 'I believe that I shall see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living' (v. 13).

2 December

John: let's start at the very beginning

When God began to create the heavens and the earth, the earth was complete chaos, and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, 'Let there be light,' and there was light. And God saw that the light was good, and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

GENESIS 1:1–5

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overtake it.

JOHN 1:1–5

Where does a story begin? A storyteller can start from any one of a number of different points, and choosing the starting point is an important decision, because the way a story begins dramatically affects the way the reader understands and interprets it. The beginning needs to be intriguing enough to make us want to read on, it has to give the initial threads that draw the reader into the plot, and it sets up clues as to how to interpret all the information that follows.

Where would you begin if you were telling the story of salvation? You might decide to start where the 'action' of the story begins, with the life and ministry of Jesus, his teaching and miracles and conversations with disciples and friends. Of course, Jesus didn't just come from nowhere, so you might start the story with his birth and add a bit of his childhood and some family history. There again, it would give a bit of context if you told something of the history of Jesus' people, and how they were expecting a Messiah – so perhaps you'd start with the prophets or even all the way back at Abraham. Come to that, you could go right back to the story of Adam and Eve: that would give you a way of showing why the human race needs salvation in the first place. Where you choose to begin the story affects the way the rest of it is understood. Matthew, Mark, Luke and John begin their gospels very differently, and through their choice of starting place each one gives the story a different slant, a different angle on Jesus, a different focus of theological truth.

A lot of the time when we read the gospels, we try to make a complete story out of four different accounts, filling in the gaps in one with material from the others. But to achieve this completeness, we sacrifice something of the vitality of each individual account. It's worth separating them out, and noticing their differences, as if we were focusing on different facets of a diamond.

Perhaps the most famous and distinctive opening of all is that of the gospel of John, so often read at carol services, on Christmas Eve or on Christmas Day. And the most obvious thing about it is how closely it echoes the opening words of Genesis. Why did John borrow these ancient words to start his gospel?

I think his borrowing trick does two interesting things. The first is to show that from John's point of view, the beginning of the salvation story is set firmly at the beginning of everything. John doesn't think of this beginning as a point in time, though, but in a conceptual, philosophical sense. He is painting a picture of a pre-human Christ – long before the birth of Jesus of Nazareth – who is part of the God who is the source of

all meaning, all life and all being. So John begins the salvation story in the arena of mystical philosophy.

Some readers of John's gospel think that he was too mystical in his approach to Jesus: they find his picture of Jesus undeniably divine but not quite convincingly human. But I think his concern was more to draw attention to the way that Jesus embodies a paradoxical meeting of the mystical and the material – or, if you like, how he connects heaven and earth. 'The Word was with God, and the Word was God,' he tells us (v. 1), leaving us in no doubt about Jesus' divinity – but now he is here in time and space. For John, the salvation story begins right back in the unknowable mysteries of eternity, but he goes on to tell us that Jesus was the means of breaking through the inaccessibility of that mystical beyond: 'The Word became flesh and lived among us' (1:14).

When someone borrows a quotation and makes a new literary classic from it, it affects the original work as well as the new one. By borrowing the opening words of Genesis, John not only grabs hold of an old and well-known phrase to launch his own story, he also gives a new twist to the way the original words are read. Once you've read the words 'In the beginning…' in John's poetic-philosophical rendition, you realise that Genesis itself is open to the same philosophical reading – that this beginning too is not only a chronological beginning but a way of exploring the idea that the source and the purpose of our life reside in God. The human search for beginnings extends far beyond a desire for factual information and a religious account is not a soft option for those who can't cope with science. It's a different kind of search altogether.

It's not exactly true to say that Genesis is *un*historical. Writings from other ancient communities in the Mediterranean basin also contain accounts that follow the same big themes as the Genesis stories, of a creation, a garden and later a warning of a flood and a family that survived in a boat. It seems likely that these ancient accounts emerge from the collective memory of prehistorical events, and geological and archaeological finds endorse this view.[1] As archaeologist C. Leonard Woolley wrote in 1934: 'We need not try to make history out of legend,

but we ought to assume that beneath much that is artificial or incredible there lurks something of fact.'[2]

The stories in Genesis 1—11 may contain something of what we understand as history, but they are also 'mythical' – not in the sense that they are like fairy tales with no serious consequence, but in the sense that they are trying to do more than just deliver facts. They are exploring truths about human life and existence that can't be assessed by popping them in a test tube or through a computer program. To get the full picture of human life and meaning, we need more than science alone: we also need poetry and philosophy, story and history, art and music. Songs, poems and novels are all forms of writing that don't necessarily claim to be factually true, yet have the capacity to communicate something about life that is true in a different and perhaps deeper sense.

The stories in the opening chapters of Genesis are *teleological* – told to demonstrate the meaning and purpose of human life, rather than to give a scientific, historical or chronological account of our origins. In that sense, Genesis is right up to date. It's doing what human beings have always done: making sense of why we are here, why we are the way we are and where we are going.

It's useful to remember, especially when popular media coverage gives the impression that science and religion are in opposition to each other, that treating Genesis as myth, philosophy or story is nothing new. To read it this way is not a thin, 21st-century apology for a religion that can't defend itself against the march of science, but a different way of thinking altogether. Augustine, writing in the early fifth century, warned against reading Genesis as if it were nothing more than a historical or chronological account:

> It is a disgraceful and dangerous thing for an infidel to hear a Christian, presumably giving the meaning of Holy Scripture, talking nonsense on these topics… the shame is not so much that

> an ignorant individual is derided, but that people outside the household of faith think our sacred writers held such opinions.[3]

And, as John himself shows us, as early as the first or second century, Christian writers distinguished between the mystical and the rational, and between poetry and factual reportage.

John, then, borrows the poetic beginning of Genesis to show that the story of Jesus began right back at the beginning of everything. In so doing, he shifts the ground for the interpretation of Genesis, showing us that the scriptures have always had the poetic capacity for reinterpretation, not to change their meaning beyond recognition but to carry the threads of its meaning from one age to the next.

3 December

Luke: let me tell you a story

Since many have undertaken to compile a narrative about the events that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed on to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word, I, too, decided, as one having a grasp of everything from the start, to write a well-ordered account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may have a firm grasp of the words in which you have been instructed.

In the days of King Herod of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly order of Abijah. His wife was descended from the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. Both of them were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord. But they had no children because Elizabeth was barren, and both were getting on in years.

LUKE 1:1–7

Luke's is the only one of the four gospels to have this kind of prologue, offering an introductory statement as to why and how the gospel was written. It is a matter of long debate whether Theophilus was the name of a real person or whether the name – which means 'lover of God' – was Luke's way of addressing his readers personally. Either way, the opening sentence has the effect of giving some sense of relationship between the storyteller and the reader. You get the sense that Luke is writing to you personally, not just addressing some nameless, faceless crowd.

Addressing his readers directly is one thing that makes Luke one of the best storytellers in the Bible; another is the way he makes the people inside the story seem real too. Luke gives us more than historical

plot, more than philosophy and doctrine: he gives us flesh-and-blood characters with whom we can identify. In particular, more than any of the other gospel writers, he brings Jesus' family to life. Matthew tells us about the surrounding circumstances of the birth stories, but only Luke has the 'inside' information. He said in his prologue that he had carefully investigated everything 'from the very first' (v. 3) – meaning the start of Jesus life, perhaps? It's possible that Luke may have known members of the holy family, and perhaps he even knew Mary, the mother of Jesus, in person. He certainly had a source close to the family to get hold of these personal anecdotes.

Luke is a storyteller, but one with a respect for historical sense – he says he wants it to be a 'well-ordered' account (v. 3) – and his reason for telling the story is that he wants to pass on the faith. The words he uses in the prologue are the words of a teacher: he speaks of what has been 'handed on' (v. 2), taught from one group to the next, and he speaks of the story as both 'truth' and 'instruction' (v. 4). Luke, then, wants to give a rational and sensible account of the events that the Christian faith are based on, and he wants to tell it in such a way that it demands personal engagement with Jesus, not just rational assent to a belief system or obedience to religious ritual.

Luke's gospel, then, relates the story of Jesus in the most humanly engaged way. His characters climb off the pages and touch our heart-strings, not just our intellect. It is Luke who gave us the great emotive and personal stories of the gospels: the parental agony and sibling rivalry in the story of the prodigal son; the unexpected friendship of Jesus towards Zacchaeus; the weaving together of twelve years in the life of a woman and a girl, both of whom need new life; the confusion and pain of the disciples on the road to Emmaus. He declares his intent, in these opening verses, to give an account of events in the right order, placing them in time and space, but he also focuses the story chiefly on human interest and Jesus' impact upon real people.

Luke gives the story definition, though, by placing it in the context of history, politics and religion. 'In the days of King Herod of Judea,

there was a priest,' he begins (v. 5), and immediately takes us to the temple in Jerusalem, the heart of first-century Judaism. His story is about religious things but, as we shall see, it turns religious matters on their head, and it also takes place in a political setting, in a nation under occupation, under the reign of a puppet king. That's important because the gospel, as Luke tells it, has political consequences as well as religious ones. And then he makes the story intensely personal by telling us that the priest and his wife 'were living blamelessly… but they had no children' (v. 6). In Zechariah and Elizabeth's cultural context, to be childless was not only a personal grief but also an implied slight on their character, as it carried with it a sense of divine judgement.

Luke begins, then, by telling us that the good news of Jesus happens at a particular moment in history to real people. He sets the scene for what will be disrupted and challenged and brought to account by the gospel and for what will be rescued and salvaged and healed. He places the good news of Jesus not merely in a religious setting, but in the wider scheme of things. It takes place 'in the days of King Herod of Judea' – right in the heart of everyday life and political history. Luke doesn't shy away from the fact that the gospel arrived at a time of injustice, in an area of war zones and occupied territories, disrupting existing political and religious hierarchies. The good news is full of life and goodness, but it is not well-behaved or polite. It is genuinely good news for real people – not only the faithful and good, but also those who are broken-hearted, whose hopes have been dashed, who live under a shadow because society unjustly hangs a question mark over their heads. Luke begins right in the heart of life: the gospel, for him, is not primarily conceptual; it affects everything: politics, religious life, community and family. It's right here, right now, and it's thoroughly personal.

4 December

Luke: flashback

Now when all the people were baptised and when Jesus also had been baptised and was praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'

Jesus was about thirty years old when he began his work. He was the son (as was thought) of Joseph son of Heli, son of Matthat, son of Levi, son of Melchi, son of Jannai, son of Joseph, son of Mattathias, son of Amos, son of Nahum, son of Esli, son of Naggai, son of Maath, son of Mattathias, son of Semein, son of Josech, son of Joda, son of Joanan, son of Rhesa, son of Zerubbabel, son of Shealtiel, son of Neri, son of Melchi, son of Addi, son of Cosam, son of Elmadam, son of Er, son of Joshua, son of Eliezer, son of Jorim, son of Matthat, son of Levi, son of Simeon, son of Judah, son of Joseph, son of Jonam, son of Eliakim, son of Melea, son of Menna, son of Mattatha, son of Nathan, son of David, son of Jesse, son of Obed, son of Boaz, son of Sala, son of Nahshon, son of Amminadab, son of Admin, son of Arni, son of Hezron, son of Perez, son of Judah, son of Jacob, son of Isaac, son of Abraham, son of Terah, son of Nahor, son of Serug, son of Reu, son of Peleg, son of Eber, son of Shelah, son of Cainan, son of Arphaxad, son of Shem, son of Noah, son of Lamech, son of Methuselah, son of Enoch, son of Jared, son of Mahalaleel, son of Cainan, son of Enos, son of Seth, son of Adam, son of God.

LUKE 3:21–38

I can almost hear you wondering, *Surely this is a misprint? Isn't this one of those bits of the Bible that you skip over when you're reading it?* Or maybe, less charitably, you're wondering whether I've been living in a university for too long and have begun to lose touch with reality altogether. Well, stay with me! This long list of names may seem like an odd detour for Luke to make, just as he has got the story going, but it tells us something vitally important about where he thinks the story begins, and it has serious theological implications for everything that follows.

Of course, this isn't 'the beginning' of Luke's gospel, in the sense that it isn't the first chapter, but this list of names shows us where Luke traces the beginning of the story to, chronologically speaking. He has used an interesting literary structure here. We saw yesterday that he does his theology largely through the mode of storytelling, rather than apologetics, philosophy or journalistic reportage. Luke is the most accomplished narrator of stories, the most literary of the gospel writers, and spends the first two chapters of his gospel painting a vivid picture of two couples in two generations of the same family. Elizabeth and Zechariah are a childless couple, already into middle age and beyond the hope of having children. Joseph and Mary are a young couple who are only just betrothed, so for Mary the expectation of a family is at once threatened (as her marriage might be called off) and, at the same time, brought forward with suddenness. The big element of surprise is that these two couples, at opposite ends of their lives, are now expecting babies.

Once the stories of the births are over, along with a vignette of Jesus' childhood, Luke then flashes forward about 18 years to the passage we have read today, when the two boys are adults, and Jesus comes to John to be baptised. This brings us to the brink of the real story – the point where the action is going to start – but then, just as Jesus enters the frame, this list of the whole family history is inserted as another flashback sequence. It's a bit like one of those movies that starts with a bit of storyline and then cuts to a completely different scene with the caption 'London, ten years earlier' – except that in this case the

flashback moves right back through the whole family tree. You can imagine the dreamlike effect if this were actually a movie, every frame showing another man with his family, each looking strikingly similar to the last one, but with the clothes and scenery becoming more and more archaic as the time frame moves backwards.

Using this flashback and flashforward technique, Luke takes us to the beginning of the story of Jesus' ministry via a patchwork of images, each one showing something of what led up to this moment, of what made Jesus significant, and why the camera is now trained on him and not on someone else.

Using this technique, Luke places the beginning of the story with Adam and Eve. John, as we saw earlier, placed the beginning before time began, to ground the idea of Jesus in philosophical theology; Luke begins not in the mystical beyond, but in the history of the whole human race. For him, the story of humankind and the story of salvation are one and the same, so his account of the gospel has a kind of double beginning: the beginning of Jesus' actual life providing a personal story that gets us involved in the central characters, and then a much longer view of where Jesus came from.

The first thing this tells us is that Luke sees salvation as a universal human issue – not limited by tribe or language, gender or education, wealth or poverty. It doesn't go back just to the prophets or to the patriarchs, but right back to the very beginning of humanity, before there were any issues of human division to consider. 'Adam, the son of God' is the 'everyman', the type of humanity – so the gospel is for everyone.

Luke delivers on this promise as his gospel unfolds. More than any of the other gospel writers, he gives us the stories of the outcast and the marginalised, the women and the Gentiles, the ill and the maimed, the poor and the socially unacceptable. We meet the woman who bleeds, the girl who is dead, the centurion (who, of course, is the enemy), the person with leprosy and the demoniac who live outside the community for fear of contaminating the rest, and the Gentile woman who is an

outsider. We hear the stories of the prodigal son who makes himself an outsider by eating pigs' food, and the lost sheep and lost coin, symbolising those who have been mislaid along the way. By tracing the beginning of the gospel back to Adam, son of God, Luke shows that the gospel really is for everyone, even to the most ragged ends of society.

A second theological point we might construe from Luke's genealogy broadens out the whole meaning of salvation. By tracing the line right back to God himself, beyond the fall of humankind, to the perfection of the garden of Eden, Luke extends the story of salvation back to the beginning of everything. Without taking anything from the wonder of redemption, the story of Jesus' incarnation is more than merely a rescue plan for a world gone wrong. In Christian doctrine, salvation is something much more than just fixing or repairing a broken thing. The Latin word *salus* suggests the idea of wholeness, healing and completeness. Salvation carries no sense of disappointment, of a second-best option. In fact, it's about bringing something to full fruition. God becoming incarnate in Christ, then, is not just a rescue mission or a 'plan B', but a fulfilment of humanity; not merely a salve for a broken world but an expression of God's desire to reveal himself in such a way that we may become like him. It is interesting to wonder whether, if the world had always been perfect and the human race always existed in peace and harmony, there would have been any call for the story of Jesus at all. By taking the very beginning of humanity – 'Adam, the son of God' – as the starting point of his gospel, Luke suggests that perhaps there would.

5 December

Matthew: what's in a name?

An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham.

Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers, and Judah the father of Perez and Zerah by Tamar, and Perez the father of Hezron, and Hezron the father of Aram, and Aram the father of Aminadab, and Aminadab the father of Nahshon, and Nahshon the father of Salmon, and Salmon the father of Boaz by Rahab, and Boaz the father of Obed by Ruth, and Obed the father of Jesse, and Jesse the father of King David.

And David was the father of Solomon by the wife of Uriah, and Solomon the father of Rehoboam, and Rehoboam the father of Abijah, and Abijah the father of Asaph, and Asaph the father of Jehoshaphat, and Jehoshaphat the father of Joram, and Joram the father of Uzziah, and Uzziah the father of Jotham, and Jotham the father of Ahaz, and Ahaz the father of Hezekiah, and Hezekiah the father of Manasseh, and Manasseh the father of Amos, and Amos the father of Josiah, and Josiah the father of Jechoniah and his brothers, at the time of the deportation to Babylon.

And after the deportation to Babylon: Jechoniah was the father of Salathiel, and Salathiel the father of Zerubbabel, and Zerubbabel the father of Abiud, and Abiud the father of Eliakim, and Eliakim the father of Azor, and Azor the father of Zadok, and Zadok the father of Achim, and Achim the father of Eliud, and Eliud the father of Eleazar, and Eleazar the father of Matthan, and Matthan the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, who bore Jesus, who is called the Messiah.

So all the generations from Abraham to David are fourteen generations; and from David to the deportation to Babylon, fourteen generations; and from the deportation to Babylon to the Messiah, fourteen generations.
MATTHEW 1:1–17

I promise this is the last time I'm going to inflict lists of names on you! These lists feature more commonly in the Hebrew scriptures, or 'Old Testament', than in the Christian writings, and are sometimes nicknamed 'begats', because of the language of the King James Version: 'Abraham begat Isaac, and Isaac begat Jacob', and so on. It's not often that we pause to consider these genealogies. For the most part, they seem to be the 'boring bits' of the Bible, but like most patterns, if you know what to look for, they do tell us something that's worth knowing.

I am intrigued by the differences between Matthew's and Luke's accounts of Jesus' ancestors. Luke, the more natural storyteller of the two, starts with the story of Jesus' birth and then inserts the genealogy as a flashback, to give some context to the story, whereas Matthew wants all the technical and historical details in place from the start. To Matthew, the personal details of the birth stories seem less important than the significance of the birth of Jesus for the status of salvation history. In relating the announcement of Jesus' birth, Matthew focused on the way that the angel's message shows how the ancient prophecies were fulfilled. He then moves directly on to the story of the magi, giving further detail to the symbolic significance of Jesus' birth, but the personal details of the story are noticeably absent. It could be, of course, that Luke had access to personal stories that Matthew did not. All the same, Matthew writes more as if he is trying to prove a point about Jesus' significance as the inheritor and fulfiller of the ancient expectations and promises of a Messiah.

This difference in focus is reinforced by the fact that Matthew's and Luke's genealogies travel in opposite directions through time. Luke begins in the present and works backwards to show where Jesus came from. The beginning is viewed through the lens of the present,

looking back to give some shape and context to the here and now, but without detracting from the vibrancy of the focus on the present. Matthew, on the other hand, chooses a starting point way back in history with the call of Abraham. Rather than going back to Adam, the son of God, as Luke did, Matthew describes Jesus as 'the son of David, the son of Abraham' (v. 1). His point is made by showing how the story of salvation connects up the dots between Abraham, David, the exile and the Messiah – the whole history of ancient Israel broken down into three divisions of 14 generations each, giving the narrative a perfect symmetry. He shows Jesus to be the true fulfilment of the messianic promises, because he is descended both from Abraham, the great patriarch, and from David, the great king.

There's an interesting link between Matthew's genealogy and the first of the candles in an Advent wreath. Advent wreaths have either four or five candles in them. The four candles round the outside – sometimes all red, sometimes three purple and one pink – are lit on the four successive Sundays of Advent, each symbolising one character or group of characters who waited for the coming of the Messiah. In order, the candles represent the patriarchs, the prophets, John the Baptist and Mary, the mother of Jesus. Some wreaths also have a fifth, white candle in the centre that is lit late on Christmas Eve to represent the Christchild. Matthew's account of the salvation story starts with Abraham, the promises of God to the patriarchs, and the establishment of God's covenant with Israel. To make sense of the new covenant, you have to start with the old covenant. In the coming days, we'll look at the beginning of the patriarchal journeys to the promised land, to see what the patriarchs can tell us about hearing the voice of God.

6 December

Mark: where the action is

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ.
As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,
'See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way,
the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:
"Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight"',
so John the baptiser appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And the whole Judean region and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him and were baptised by him in the River Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. He proclaimed, 'The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the strap of his sandals. I have baptised you with water, but he will baptise you with the Holy Spirit.'

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptised by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove upon him. And a voice came from the heavens, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'

MARK 1:1–11

While Luke and Matthew begin their gospels with the birth stories, Mark starts with the adult Jesus. That's a reasonable shorthand description of the differences between the gospels, and it's the primary reason that Mark is not often read at Christmas. But where Mark chooses to begin the story is just as important and revealing as the narratives of the other gospel writers. The first eight verses are the sum total of his preliminaries, and he then spends only another five verses on the baptism and temptations of Jesus before the story proper kicks off with the arrest of John the Baptist, which is the signal for the beginning of Jesus' ministry. A mere 13 verses of prologue, then, and Mark is right into the first act of his story; he is keen to get on with the action.

Mark seems to address his gospel to two big questions: 'Who is Jesus?' and 'What should a disciple of Jesus be like?' To answer his questions, he uses a writing style that is immediate and pacy, almost journalistic. He uses the present and the present continuous tenses a lot, which gives the feeling that the reader is right there in the story, watching the action or perhaps that Mark himself is standing at the scene with a microphone, doing a TV commentary. There's no 'Once upon a time…' for Mark; he tells it right here, right now, often using phrases like 'And Jesus goes up the mountain…' or 'Now Jesus comes into the house, and says to them…' or 'And they bring him a blind man….'

The brevity of Mark's prologue makes it even more noticeable that he doesn't begin the gospel with Jesus, but with John the Baptist, the herald of Christ, for whom the third candle in the Advent wreath is lit. The prophecy, which Mark claims is from Isaiah, is actually a mixture of Exodus 23:20, Isaiah 40:3 and Malachi 3:1. It's a mystery why he brought these three together, and highly unlikely that he made a mistake. It's perhaps worth noting that Malachi is the prophet who says specifically that Elijah will return before 'the great and terrible day of the Lord' (4:5–6), and John the Baptist is often seen as being a herald in the style and mode of Elijah. So perhaps Mark was calling on those words to strengthen the importance of John the Baptist in his narrative, although that still doesn't explain why he attributes the words to Isaiah alone.

Mark's starting point, then, is the prophets who foretold the herald who would announce the Messiah. However quickly he wants to turn to the immediacy of his main questions, 'Who is Jesus?' and 'What should we, his followers, be like?', he still anchors the story into the continuity between the ancient prophets and the contemporary herald of Christ.

In our generation, many hold the opinion that the church is out of date and old-fashioned, and needs to do more to relate to the surrounding culture. All kinds of movements and groups are taken up with this concern. Many Christians have lost faith in the traditional denominations and have started up little groups that are trying to recreate church without the institutional baggage. Within the traditional church denominations, there has been a range of responses, over several decades, including an array of Christian festivals, the Fresh Expressions initiative of the early 2000s, movements such as Alpha and Oasis, and more recently a recognition that the most traditional forms of liturgy can, in themselves, be counter-cultural.

Conversations abound, everywhere from church meetings to social media, about who and what the church is – and, for the most part, they are asking the same big questions that Mark did: 'Who is Jesus?' and 'What should we, his followers, be like?' And, particularly in non-traditional and non-institutional environments, they approach the questions with the same kind of immediacy and cut-to-the-chase attitude that Mark's writing portrays. It's worth noting, then, that even Mark thought it was important not to lose sight of the fact that every story grows out of somewhere, and he anchors his gospel in with the 'big picture', connecting it to the prophets, the heralds, the enablers and the catalysts who brought the messianic vision into reality. It's important to get to the point and to find out what relevance it has for us now. But Mark reminds us that there still has to be continuity with what went before.

7 December

Adam and Eve: the end of the beginning

They heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden. But the Lord God called to the man and said to him, 'Where are you?' He said, 'I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked, and I hid myself.' He said, 'Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?' The man said, 'The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit from the tree, and I ate.' Then the Lord God said to the woman, 'What is this that you have done?' The woman said, 'The serpent tricked me, and I ate.' The Lord God said to the serpent,

'Because you have done this,
cursed are you among all animals
and among all wild creatures;
upon your belly you shall go,
and dust you shall eat
all the days of your life.
I will put enmity between you and the woman
and between your offspring and hers;
he will strike your head,
and you will strike his heel.'

To the woman he said,

'I will make your pangs in childbirth exceedingly great;
in pain you shall bring forth children,
yet your desire shall be for your husband,
and he shall rule over you.'

And to the man he said,
‘Because you have listened to the voice of your wife
and have eaten of the tree
about which I commanded you,
“You shall not eat of it,”
cursed is the ground because of you;
in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life;
thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you;
and you shall eat the plants of the field.
By the sweat of your face
you shall eat bread
until you return to the ground,
for out of it you were taken;
you are dust,
and to dust you shall return.’
GENESIS 3:8–19

In 1918, as the survivors of World War I began to return home, many found that their faith had taken too much of a beating for them simply to resume their churchgoing habits. For some, there was a realisation that going to church had never, for them, been anything more than a social form. For others, their faith had formerly been based on the idea that Britain, still in empire mentality, had God’s special approval, as if God was ‘on our side’. This notion was blown to pieces, along with tragic numbers of young lives, in the trenches of northern Europe. As the survivors returned, many discovered a complete loss of connection with the services and liturgies of the Church of England: words that had once seemed comforting and reassuring suddenly seemed alien, even quite offensive, in the light of their shattering wartime experiences.

It was in response to this that Eric Milner White, then chaplain to King’s College Cambridge, constructed the now famous Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols. He decided to abandon the structure of traditional liturgies for his Christmas service. Instead, he adapted an existing idea that had been used by E.W. Benson at Truro Cathedral, choosing nine readings from the Bible that simply told the story of salvation and

interspersing them with carols that illustrated the readings. His idea was that anyone, whether or not they were familiar with church doctrine, should be able to follow the story of salvation if it was told through these sequential readings and music. The Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols is still kept each Christmas Eve at King's College. Since 1928 it has been broadcast all over the world and has become an important moment in the Christmas ritual for thousands of people. The first of the nine lessons is this account of Adam and Eve's 'fall from grace'. In Milner White's scheme, it forms the beginning of the salvation story by giving an account of the human condition and the need for salvation.

Few people now accept the idea of a single couple, created by God from the dust of the earth, as a literal account of history; rather, this is a story that gives an account of the state of our relationship to God. The idea of sinless perfection and an unbroken, face-to-face relationship with God describes a fundamental religious longing, or a 'desire of the heart', as the psalmists might have put it. The idea that such an existence in Paradise was lost and that it might again be restored gives us a thoroughly human story; if you like, Adam and Eve are the 'everyman'. What matters is not whether they were literal historical figures, but that they symbolise the human dilemma of imperfection, guilt and broken relationship and the longing for restoration.

Adam's reaction, when he hears God in the garden, is this: 'I hid myself' (v. 10). The most fundamental problem that lies behind the story of Christmas is the alienation of human beings from God. Why do we hide from God? Ever since the philosopher Kant redefined the self in terms of the subject and the object, we have identified ourselves in terms of the self as distinct from the 'other' – and when it comes to talking about God, there is no one more 'other' than he is. However much we are separated and alienated from one another, we are even more so from God. God is morally 'other', in that however good we are, we never match his perfection. He is also physically 'other': he doesn't grow old or suffer from backache or toothache, and he isn't limited by space or gravity. And God is 'other' in the field of knowledge: I cannot tell him anything he doesn't already know.

We are, of course, able to overcome our problem of interpersonal alienation to a certain degree. Despite our separation from one another, we form close connections, even to the extent of finding a soulmate – someone who, despite being 'other', somehow seems to fit perfectly with me, to understand me without effort, to hold the key to the door of my soul, the password to my internal files. Such relationships give us a glimpse of how life might be were we not alienated from others and from God.

Preparing the ground for the Christmas story, then, this passage sets out for us what our situation is: we know that we should be at peace with ourselves and closely connected with one another and with God, and yet we find ourselves alienated and unable to maintain an intimate connection either with God (v. 10) or with each other (v. 15). We are divided from each other, often over the smallest things. As the medieval carol, 'Adam lay ybounden', puts it so eloquently: 'And all was for an apple, an apple that he took.' For the sake of this apple, Adam proceeded to 'shop' his wife (v. 12). It is not difficult to imagine Eve's outrage: to be blamed for wrongdoing by the perpetrator is already a serious betrayal; when that betrayal comes from a spouse, the damage goes very deep indeed.

So the first of Milner White's Nine Lessons lays out the problem: we are alienated from one another and alienated from God. Something or someone needs to break the deadlock. Someone needs to make the circumstances possible – to bring these alienated beings into each other's orbit, so that they can discover themselves in one another.

'Let me encourage you to get a copy of this book to go with your Advent calendar. In and among the busyness of those December days, these daily Bible readings will enable you to prepare for the coming of God once again.'
Methodist Recorder

Advent is all about beginnings. It's the beginning of the church year, and its themes include the beginning of creation, the beginning of Christianity and the beginning of the new heavens and the new earth. Most of these beginnings are born out of the ending of something else – an old era giving way to a new one. These beginnings and endings are on a cosmic scale, but most of what happens in life happens 'in between'.

Our everyday lives are full of small-scale beginnings and endings – births, deaths, marriages, careers, house moves and so on. How do the grand-scale beginnings and endings of Advent help to guide us as we seek to follow Jesus in the 21st century? This book reflects on the stories of six groups of people and individual characters from the Bible; each provides a focus in some way for the idea of beginnings and endings, and each gives us a glimpse into – and draws ancient wisdom from – the human experience that happened in between.

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